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ABSTRACT

A study examined how a select group of successful high school journalism teachers face the challenge of applying professional standards in the quest for student press freedom. A total of 162 questionnaires (representing a response rate of 46.5%) were returned by a purposive sample of teachers who advise some of the most highly acclaimed student newspapers in the United States. Results indicated that: (1) 90% of the advisers agreed strongly or somewhat that students must behave ethically if they want to exercise freedom of the press in the high school newspaper; (2) the advisers valued classroom instruction and also the learning that comes from addressing specific ethical issues confronting the professional and student press; and (3) the advisers acknowledged their role as a bridge to the professional press and they put a premium on helping their students acquire the tools to make ethical decisions. Findings suggest that the advisers of acclaimed student newspapers ARE setting high standards for their students and definitely want their publications and students to be identified with the best of professional journalism. (Contains 20 references, 1 note, and 3 tables of data.) (RS)

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The High School Ethics Challenge:
Using Standards of Professional Journalism
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The High School Ethics Challenge: Using Standards of Professional Journalism Without the Freedoms of the Professional Press

Most educators consider it part of their job to instill a sense of civic responsibility in their students. Without imposing their personal values, teachers--including their classroom counterparts in journalism--seek student work that reflects the highest ethical standards (Wynne, 1985).

But what are those standards? Indeed, what is Ethics? Patterson & Wilkins (1994) appropriately define ethics as a systematic way to apply a set of moral principles or guidelines to individual or group conduct. Harder than defining the concept is finding a system that brings ethics to life. This paper, which focuses on how a select group of successful high school journalism teachers are searching for an ethical model, will reveal the challenges of applying professional standards in the quest for student press freedom.

* * * * *

Ethics is a complex problem for the professional media and an even more complicated concern for high school publications. Professional journalists face a disenchanted, increasingly cynical public that expects the news media to be public servants, giving the public what it wants while monitoring government on behalf of the citizenry. But vigilant news organizations that report on government in terms the public considers unfavorable

are accused of being unpatriotic and of undermining public support of institutions (Kees & Phillips, 1994). In an effort to regain public support, journalists today are devoting more attention to ethics (Mathews, 1994).

Ethical behavior, however, is an elusive, moving target for the professional press. Just ask members of the Associated Press Managing Editors. APME's Ethics Committee recently completed a two-year search for a way to strengthen its Code of Ethics. The more it tried to be specific when defining journalistic principles, however, the more resistance there was. No one argued with the need for consistent adherence to high standards, but few could agree on how those standards would or should translate to daily practice (APME Ethics Committee, 1994).

Journalism ethics is just as hard to define and apply in the high school, although for somewhat different reasons. For example, there is evidence that more high school students may be working on student publications today, but they are bringing more cynicism with them. The George H. Gallup International Institute found that the percentage of teenagers who worked on the school newspaper or yearbook rose from 8% in 1985 to 10% in 1989 (Bezilla, 1993). However, the percentage of all teenagers who said that the United States was doing an excellent or good job of preserving freedoms of speech and the press dropped 10% between 1985 and the end of 1988 (Bezilla, p. 299).

Scholastic journalism seems to face an even greater burden because of a U.S. Supreme Court ruling that has given ethics education an even higher profile in the schools.

The High Court discussed ethics in 1988 when it gave school officials more discretion to regulate the student press. The Court noted that Hazelwood East's Curriculum Guide said that students in Journalism II were to learn "the legal, moral, and ethical restrictions imposed upon journalists within the school community" (Hazelwood v. Kuhlmeier, p. 568).

Hazelwood forced student journalists to do a better job when the Supreme Court made ethics a condition of press freedom (Ortman, 1989; Ricchiardi, 1990; Eveslage & D'Angelo, 1994). The Court essentially challenged publications advisers to find ways to teach rights and responsibilities, but implied the direction to take when it identified professionalism as the standard (Hazelwood v. Kuhlmeier).

Ethics only recently has focused attention on how student journalists look to professionals for guidance (Eveslage & D'Angelo, 1994) as they learn to make ethical decisions in the scholastic journalism context (C:JET, 1994). A recent national survey of select journalism teachers offers some insight on this issue.

METHOD

A detailed questionnaire was sent to a purposive sample of teachers who advise some of the most highly acclaimed student newspapers in the country. These teachers were believed to be advising publications whose staffs deal with substantive issues and have ways to handle ethical dilemmas.

In February of 1994, questionnaires were mailed to 348 newspaper advisers. Included were all of Quill and Scroll's 1992 and 1993 Gallup Award winners, newspaper and newsmagazine recipients of the Columbia Scholastic Press Association's Medalist award in 1993, and the 1992-93 Newspaper Pacemaker finalists of the National Scholastic Press Association. The leaders of one national student press organization (the Journalism Education Association) and one state association (Pennsylvania's) also were surveyed.

A follow-up postcard was sent to encourage all surveyed teachers to respond. By July, 162 questionnaires were returned, for a response rate of 46.5%.

Besides demographic data, the survey provided details about why and how these advisers teach ethics. It also clearly revealed the extent to which advisers of award-winning student newspapers embraced the tenets of journalism and patterned their publication policies after those of the professionals.

FINDINGS

Survey results should not be generalized to all journalism programs or teachers. Respondents resemble more closely the Journalism Education Association's membership of experienced advisers (JEA, 1992) than they represent the average journalism teacher (Dvorak, Lain & Dickson, 1994).

Teachers who responded are experienced journalism educators. Two-thirds (67.9%) have advised a student publication for more than 10 years, 42% for more than 15 years. Their newspapers are published monthly (63.4%) or two or three times a month (16.8%). Only 14 (8.6%) of these advisers are in a high school of 500 or fewer students, 119 (73.4%) in a high school of at least 1,000 students. More than eight in ten said they are in urban schools: 24.7% in a city, 57.4% in the suburbs.

Most of the 162 newspaper advisers who responded also teach a journalism class (71%). Of these respondents, 59.2% have done so for more than 10 years, 37.4% for at least 15 years. Just 6.9% of the respondents said their students were not enrolled in a journalism class (perhaps because none existed in the school). At the other extreme, 48.4% said <u>all</u> staff members were enrolled in or had taken a journalism course.

A majority said their journalism courses lasted a year (57.2%) or a semester (39.1%). Estimating the amount of classroom attention to ethics, 39.3% said they devoted 1-5 class

periods per semester; 34.5% said 6-10 periods.

The questionnaire did not refer to the Hazelwood case and it would be inappropriate to conclude that this Supreme Court ruling is the sole, or even primary, contributor to increased ethics attention. The survey did not reveal whether these journalism teachers are spending more classroom time with ethics now, but about half (49%) said that ethics is of more concern to the student press today than it was five years earlier. Another 40% said it is just as important now. One indication that the impetus for ethics study may come from within the school: three-fourths of the respondents (72.3%) said their student newspaper staff faced an ethical dilemma during the past two years.

Survey results indicate in many ways how the professional press and professional standards affect how ethics is defined and taught in the high school.

Most advisers who responded defined ethics in a way consistent with efforts to professionalize student publications. These advisers seem comfortable defining ethics as a system for determining appropriate behavior, a set of rules or guidelines for behavior and a personal moral code. This multi-faceted definition calls for attention to structure (creating guidelines), self-study and discovery (incorporating personal and professional values as one applies the guidelines) (see Table 1).

Surveyed advisers clearly see ethics study as a way to help

students learn how to make ethical decisions; 93.1% of those surveyed said as much. Their concern parallels that of the professional journalist seeking a system for consistent ethical behavior.

If judges and school officials alike are willing to tie scholastic press freedom to responsible student journalism, one would expect advisers to teach how law and ethics interact. In this study, two-thirds of the respondents (77.5%) who teach a journalism course said they cover law and ethics as one topic in the course; 17% teach them as separate topics. More than 40% said the most effective way to teach ethics would to integrate it even more--while teaching other topics in the course, such as interviewing or feature writing. Some disagreed. Fewer than one in four (23.1%) of all respondents said that combining ethics and law is the most effective way to teach ethics, and 23.7% said ethics should be taught as a separate course.

Just as professionals believe that ethical press standards must evolve from the daily context of journalism (Mathews, 1994), so did the surveyed advisers clearly indicate that the context for ethics education should be a blend of theory and practice and not be confined to the classroom. Only 8.3% of the respondents said ethics is best taught through work on a student publication instead of in the classroom; 71.5% disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement that journalism ethics is best

taught in a classroom setting apart from the news room.[1]

Earlier research on ethics revealed that case studies are valuable tools for teaching high school journalists to make ethical decisions (Day & Butler, 1989, and Herlong, 1985). The current study supports those findings. Assessing the effectiveness of various techniques for teaching ethics, respondents in the present study valued most having student journalists grapple with a specific ethical problem and tying discussion to concerns of the student newspaper (see Table 2).

That the surveyed teachers set high standards for their students and publications also suggests the eagerness to identify with the best of professional journalism. These advisers look to the professional press for guidelines and models. Assessing reasons high school journalism students should study ethics, 89.3% said it was important or extremely important that students understand how professional journalists handle ethical problems. More than 73% said using professionals as guest lecturers is an effective teaching tool; almost 80% said the same about discussions of issues in the national media.

Respondents also obviously considered professional journalism when they identified their most important advising roles. Their job, they said, is to help students publish a newspaper that is free of legal problems, yet thoroughly covers the school. Relatively few advisers (14%) said it was important

that they spare school personnel from embarrassment.

These advisers again indicated their allegiance to professionalism when asked about various ways their newspaper staff might deal with an ethical problem. Almost 94% of the respondents strongly agreed or agreed that their students should apply ethical standards of professional journalists.

When asked to rate the traits of the good student journalist and the good professional, the respondents listed the same characteristics at the top of both lists. Truthful news gathering and presentation, thoroughness and fairness are most valued among good journalists in both groups, these teachers said.

Advisers surveyed believe that fairly uniform ethical behavior will result if a system exists for applying principles to behavior and staff members consistently apply guidelines during the process of confronting various ethical dilemmas. But survey answers also reflected a dilemma professional journalists face.

Most respondents (86%) strongly agreed or agreed that students should deal with ethical problems in a consistent way. But almost as many (74.9%) strongly agreed or agreed that students should view each ethical problem as a unique and different situation (See Table 3). This resembles the ambivalence of managing editors during the recent two-year debate

over refinement of APME's ethics code. The professionals could pretty much agree on journalism standards, and even on some guidelines, but balked at specific prescriptions for appropriate and inappropriate behavior (APME, 1994).

The publications advisers surveyed, perhaps because of the school setting or because of their role as educators, were more receptive to written guidelines than professional journalists seem to be. In 1992, the National Ethics Committee of the Society of Professional Journalists found that 44% of newspapers and 49% of television stations surveyed relied on written codes (Black, Steele & Barney, 1995, p. 221).

Far more high school publications rely on such standards. More than eight in ten (81.6%) of the advisers surveyed said that their newspaper has a set of written guidelines. Most often--43.1% of the time--the editors and adviser wrote the ethical guidelines together, modeling them "quite closely" after those of professional journalists 59.5% of the time and "exactly" after professional codes 19.8% of the time.

Greater reliance on written guidelines may be an artifact of this sample--a select group of advisers. Ethics clearly is a growing concern of the student press. It is worth noting, for example, that the staffs of one-third of the surveyed respondents working with written ethical guidelines developed those guidelines within the past five years; 64.4% did so during the

past decade. Contrast this with the professional process. The SPJ survey found that 48% of newspapers that developed their own ethics codes did so during the past decade (Black, Steele & Barney, 1995, p. 223).

If codes and written standards guiding the student press are closer to textbook definitions of good journalism than to those evolving from daily news room struggles of professionals, there may be another reason. Most professional codes and guidelines are voluntary, with no formal sanctions. APME removed any enforcement implications before members approved the revised code last October (APME, 1994), and just 42.5% of the SPJ-surveyed newspapers with codes in 1992 had a written enforcement policy (Black, Steele & Barney, 1995, p. 222). The advisers surveyed for this study, however, see loss of press freedom as a very real sanction for failure to abide by the tenets of good journalism.

CONCLUSIONS

Washington Post ombudsman Joann Byrd (1993) notes that ethical performance is not a condition of freedom for the professional press. "Every time we think the First Amendment is a command to apply no judgment, every time we hold it up as a shield, every time we act as if outsiders have no right to question what we do, we are abusing the First Amendment," she

told professional journalists. The First Amendment does allow us to speak, Byrd added, but it does not tell us what to say or whether to speak.

In its new edition of Law of the Student Press, the Student Press Law Center also clearly and correctly notes the distinction between law and ethics. Stressing that ethics codes are only guides, the SPLC says that "School officials or others are wrong to equate a violation of an ethical code with a legal violation that can be prosecuted and punished" (1994, p. 20). The ethics survey discussed in this paper suggests, however, that the line between law and ethics for high school journalists is fading.

When 90% of the advisers surveyed in this study agree strongly or somewhat that students must behave ethically if they want to exercise freedom of the press in the high school newspaper, one can only conclude that ethics instead is becoming a lifeline for student expression. That means that sincere journalism advisers must ask students to meet professional standards without the assurances that they will have the press freedom afforded professionals.

These surveyed teachers value classroom instruction, but also learning that comes from addressing specific ethical issues confronting the professional and student press. The teachers acknowledge their role as a bridge to the professional press and they put a premium on helping their students acquire the tools to

make ethical decisions.

This look at ethics education reveals that advisers of 162 acclaimed student newspapers ARE setting high standards for their students. These advisers definitely want their publications and students to be identified with the best of professional journalism.

FOOTNOTE

1 Respondents used a five-point Likert scale to convey beliefs and attitudes on some survey questions. For this report, the "extremely" and "somewhat" responses have been combined.

TABLE 1

Advisers who "strongly agree" or "agree" with the following definitions of ethics

DEFINITION	%
A system for determining acceptable social behavior	68.9
An individual's moral code	61.6
Rules or guidelines for determining acceptable social behavior	61.4
Society's prevailing standards of behavior	40.4
Legal limits to individual behavior	33.5

TABLE 2

Advisers who rate the following techniques "extremely effective" or "effective" for teaching ethics

TECHNIQUE	%
Staff discussions--staff members deal with a specific ethical problem	96.1
Planned discussion of case studies--your student newspaper	89.5
Staff discussions after printing something that raised an ethical problem	88.1
Planned discussion of case studies--local media	81.0
Unplanned discussions of ethical implications while other journalism topics are being discussed	81.0
Planned discussions--national media	79.1
Guest lectures by professional journalists	73.2
Scheduled staff discussions of ethical codes/guidelines relating to specific, hypothetical ethical problems	45.9
Planned class lectures on text or reading material	29.4
Assigned readings from a textbook	20.3
Tests on reading material and class lectures	10.5

TABLE 3

Advisers who rate as "extremely important" or "important" the following ways staff members should deal with ethical problems

APPROACH	%
Consistently from problem to problem and issue to issue	86.0
Applying the professional standards of professional journalism	83.3
Through consensus among all of the staff	74.8
By viewing each ethical problem as a unique situation	73.9
By staff members deferring to the judgment of the editor	29.7
Trying to accommodate the ethical views of the greatest number of readers	21.8
Consistent with the personal convictions of you, the advisor	16.8

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